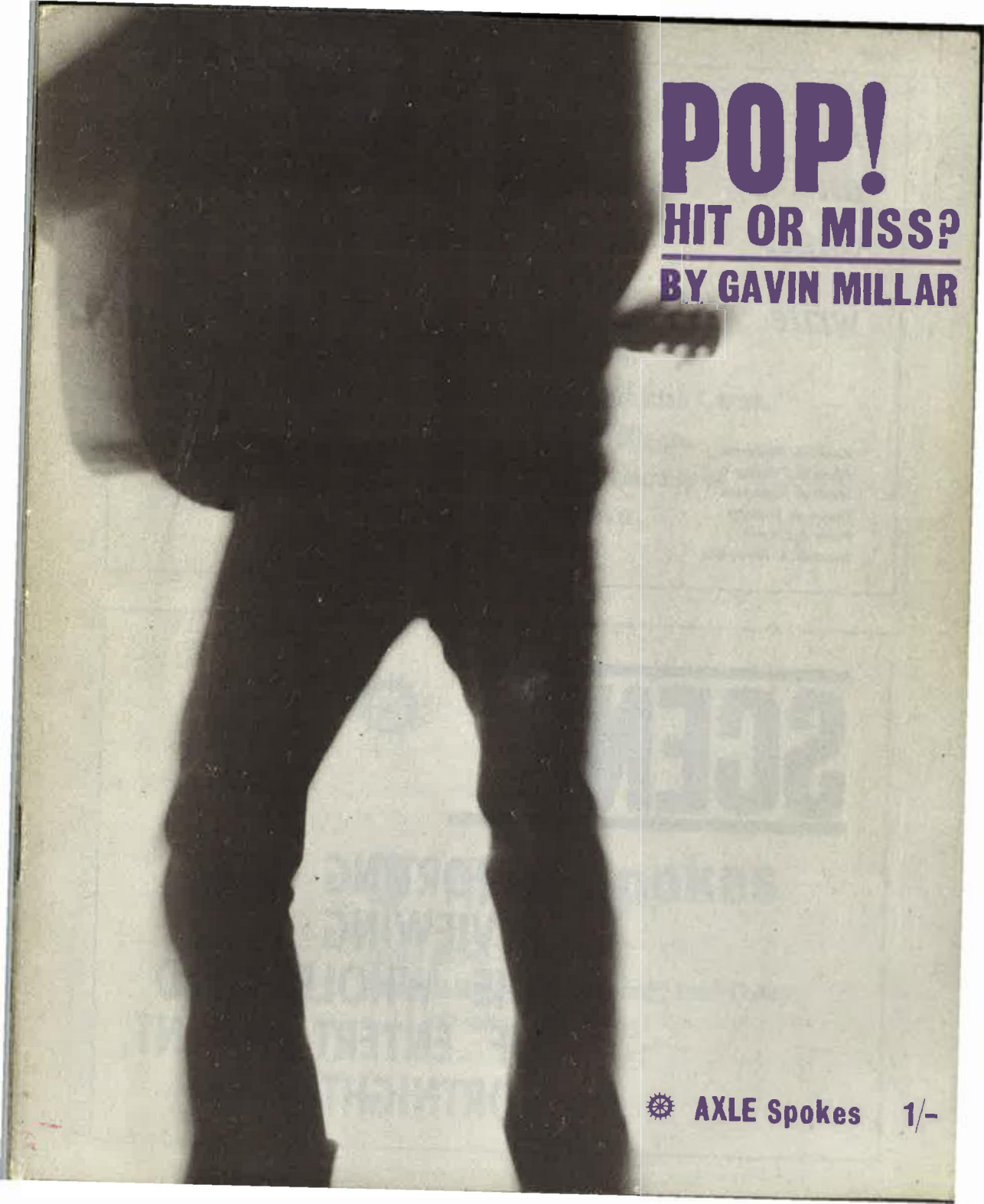

POP!
HIT OR MISS?

BY GAVIN MILLAR

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SCENE

REPORTING AND REVIEWING THE WHOLE FIELD OF ENTERTAINMENT FORTNIGHTLY 2'-

Gavin Millar

Pop!

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About ten years ago a shrewd show business promoter named Maurice Kinn took over a small-time Denmark Street weekly called the Musical Express, changed the name to New Musical Express and waited for something interesting to happen. He was in at the front and didn't have long to wait. From a small circulation number for professional musicians the NME grew swiftly into the world's largest-selling music paper. This week the NME will sell close on a quarter of a million copies.

This beats all its rivals rolled into one. The nearest, the old-established Melody Maker, turns over in the 60-70,000 region. Others, like the New Record Mirror and Disc, are way below this. Why the difference?

First, the MM is more strictly a jazz weekly. The attention it pays to the charts, you feel, is by way of a concession. The NME is selling a different product to a different public. I asked Alan Smith, an NME staff writer, why he thought his paper was so popular. 'We give the kids what they want. We write about their current idols. And we're not so much a jazz paper, like the MM, as a pop paper. A lot of our competitors write about stars who have dropped out of the charts, why they've lost their popularity etc. And they write about up-and-coming singers who are going to be the stars of tomorrow. It's the stars of today the kids want to know about, not the stars of tomorrow.'

It's difficult to remember that a surprisingly short time ago pop was a word which meant just dad or lemonade; that in a few years the staggering growth of a new public and a new type of music has resulted in unbelievable specialisation. The pop market breaks down into fascinating fragments in print - like the C & W Record Review. (For those who neither twist nor swing C & W means Country and Western). The magazine's subtitle is 'Country music's most progressive magazine', which suggests that there are just dozens of square, reactionary old Country Music

magazines ready to trap the unwary C & W fan into some slow reading. Now what happened to the pop world after 1950 to account for this change?

In those days I remember it was still possible to think of Sinatra, Doris Day, Ella, Jo Stafford, Perry Como and so on, as performers roughly belonging to the same world. They were all, great or indifferent, popular singers. Not too much distinction was drawn between jazz singers proper and what we might call romance singers. For better or worse, I don't think that nowadays Sinatra or Ella Fitzgerald could be considered as performers in the same genre - let's leave calibre out of it for the moment - as the artists who cram the charts weekly. They sing a different kind of song for a different kind of public. Perhaps a slightly older public.

Where did the young ones come from then, who decided to notice they were there, and who decided to cater for them? Look at the chart toppers of 1954. Eddie Calvert's Oh Mein Papa - a straight sentimental instrumental appealing to all ages. Doris Day's Secret Love, Frankie's Three Coins in a Fountain, Kitty Kallen's Little Things Mean a Lot : three solid ballads - a nice blend of the mysterious, the exotic and the domestic that we all like to think characterises our love affairs. And then - what's this? Somebody called Johnny Ray with a song called Such a Night. The revolution is at hand. We are stepping into altogether new country.

Although Sinatra, Day and Kallen were singing about love, they were nothing if not polite about it. But the words that Ray sang, coupled with his gyrations on the stage, had the audience on the floor screaming. On inspection it was discovered that the victims were, by and large, teenage girls. Before long a fellow called Bill Haley siphoned off the passion in Ray's performances, solidified it into a wild beat, and gave birth to Rock. And so entered Elvis.

Elvis the King, as he now - still - is, was, oddly enough, the boy next door when he began. And this was what characterised the new revolution. Whether it was because the kids had more money, or were maturing earlier, or were encouraged to independence, they clearly wanted their idols to come from their own ranks. How were the ranks composed? How old are they now? Well, Brenda Lee and Helen Shapiro are both recent schoolgirls, if that's any indication. A look at Roxy or Marilyn or their competitors reflects a fairly accurate image of its reader.

It's a girl. No surprise there. Roxy is a fairly late-teen mag because in its stories the

girls are secretaries, models, receptionists. Dickie Valentine, Cliff Richard, Bernard Cribbins and the Shadows are all featured in a recent number. This interest extends, slightly less warmly, upwards into the young-woman fashion and household mags a little way, and downward, astonishingly, through a variety of girls'comics, to an age-group hovering around the ten-year-old mark. Girl,aimed at the 12-15-year-olds, has a show page edited by Helen Shapiro. Judy, a slightly younger publication, has a star page which recently featured Frank Ifield and plugged I Remember You. It also runs a sketch alongside Ifield's portrait of a young teenage girl listening ostensibly to the record. In the front of the picture sits Mum. She is holding a photograph album with photos of daughter at an even earlier age in tutu and diaper. 'I remember you' is the obvious message but, ironically, the daughter's sentiment is pseudo-romantic while the mother's is simply maternal. 'How quickly this generation has grown up!' is the caption we are all meant to supply.

The girl in Roxy is an interesting mixture of cynicism and romanticism. Men, for the most part, are poison, full of menace, out to trap her. A secretary's boss makes a pass - 'more of a clumsy sort of grab' - at her. She and her pal decide to give up men and spend their evenings trying home perm kits. Who for, one wonders? To impress each other? It can't, surely, be to impress men? A model is used by her adman boss as a publicity gimmick and not as a woman. 'What shall I talk about to interest my date?' asks one girl. 'Talk about him', answers her pal. 'The topic that interests a fella most is himself'. One man, who is sincerely loved, emigrates alone to Canada. She hadn't told him she loved him. In an imaginary encounter she tells his ghost, 'We've never gone in for soppy stuff Gerry, moon and June... that sort of thing. But I love you with all my heart...I never did tell you I loved you... that wasn't our way'. The man calls her 'female', and tells her, 'Life's a party and it'll soon be over. Let's grab it while we can.' But it's too late. He grabs the dangerous job on the Canadian dam project instead. And yet...despite the fact that men are footloose and fancy-free, irresponsible and, if not actually menacing, at least fresh, they fall in love with electric zeal towards the bottom of the page. Nothing in their characters had previously led us to suspect that they would. But there it is. 'Suddenly', (and I quote from countless sources), 'the Miracle had happened'.

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There is, on the other hand, one type of male who gets a sympathetic hearing all the way through. We know he will be rewarded with this dazzling girl, the poor oaf. It would be too cruel to let him stumble through life without her help. For this man, who is often called George I'm afraid, is clumsy, he is a goon, but he is lovable. He's too big, or too small, he falls down steps, walks into lamposts, trips over dogs, spills ice-cream down fat ladies' bosoms - in fact he is a real gremlin, old George. But because the poor fellow is just so hopeless he is perfect meat for the protective female. He hasn't got a hope. Exit George towards the church.

There we are then. Men, for the teenage girl, are a constant threat, sometimes a physical one. Thoughtless, omnipotent, cruel, casual, but necessary. Occasionally they can be dispensed with, if you can just lay your hands on a good home-perm kit. And occasionally they are so feckless that they present no threat but need protecting. In all this the girls are nothing if not realistic. But then, lo and behold, as often as not they'll have the men falling in love with them if they just hold on long enough. And there we step into the dream.

Did someone mention sex? It doesn't rear its ugly head. The worst thing that ever happens is that she 'submits to his kisses' and that usually turns out to be the best thing that ever happened.

How does this image square then with the type of men the girls go for in show business? Who are the idols? What do they look like and what do they do?

In this issue of Roxy I'm looking at the resident girl reporter interviews Ian McShane, new star of The Wild and the Willing. The moment his quizzical eyes meet hers she goes off into a string of dots.... Ian McShane in this portrait is clearly unrecognisable as any of the male villains who abound throughout the rest of Roxy. He is a desirable commodity. Perhaps he is a dream-marriage prospect. The only personal ads that the magazines carry are notices of pen-friend clubs, fan clubs and marriage-bureaux. Are the girls lonely? Are they not able to meet suitable boys from their own district? Or is it that they're being fed on the expectation of something bigger and more glamorous than the boy next door? McShane certainly indicates an escape from the bad-man image, and one wonders if he and his like aren't so idealised because the reality is felt to be so grim. In that case the blame lies at the door of the business which sells the dreams.

So, boys are generally bad, but occasional ones are god-like, i.e. if they are pop stars. The essence of the star on the other hand is that he is basically the boy next door. He's one of us. But nevertheless he's unattainable. We make him a fetish - send me, Johnny, your buttons, your hair, your nail-clippings, your pants, your shoelaces. On the other hand, if he marries he disqualifies himself. But you thought he was unattainable anyway? Yes, but there's always room for the miracle to happen. At the bottom of the page.

The bottom of the page however is the bit left out when we move from pop literature to the stars themselves. Obviously, because no one can seriously expect to be the one that Ian or Adam chooses. But what happens to the image now?

In the first place the men are aggressively male in a way in which the cardboard heroes in Roxy are not. Their stage names indicate this, among other things. Adam Faith is the first man in the world: plain, honest, trustworthy - and elemental. Eden Kane is another raw appeal to the beginning of things and to a lack of affectation. There ought to be a girl singer called Eve Treachery if psychology is anything to go by. Eartha Kitt comes pretty close, of course. Cliff Richard is chummy, solid, rocklike. Billy Fury, whose real name is Ronald Wycherley, has certainly sharpened up his image. Buddy is friendly. And so on.

They live in a strange, tight interconnected world. It's a world in which, though fashions catch on and spread everywhere, from Sidney to Stornoway, in a few days, nothing is stable for longer than a few weeks. A year ago the cha-cha, then the twist, then the Madison, now the Bossa Nova, all before we've got to grips with the Madison. Tommy Steele, working on the principle of not showing himself too often to the kids in order to keep them thirsty, loses his audience altogether. They just forget him. A note in a magazine about fan-clubs makes plaintive reading.'Last month I reported sadly that Gene Vincent's British fan club had closed through failing membership. Now I'm told of a take-over bid by Janice Rowland, who already runs clubs for Brenda Lee and Sounds Incorporated...The club she opened for Bruce Channel a few months ago has now closed'.

The run is on youth and the spotlight, except for the few giants, is only on you for a few moments. While it's there, of course, its glare can be almost insupportable. Some of the stars seem surprised. Bobby Vee has just had his short life story turned into a film called The Idol.

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About the fans he is reported as saying, 'They have this image of someone wonderful in their minds, but when they're up real close they find out I'm just an ordinary person'. The fans sometimes don't understand that their idols can't last - for no very good reason except fashion.

But the stars know that their lives as pop idols are short. It accounts for their almost constant introspection. Practically every feature you read will be an anxious inquiry. Will Chirt Frank's Roll 'em Rock 'em be a hit down under? Will it be a hit up top? Will it make the charts? Will this number restore so and so's reputation? As in no other entertainment business the subject of discussion is not entertainment value but success. The hypnotic charts befog everyone's horizon with their instant recipe for fame, fortune and, all too often, quality. It accounts for the fact, too, that a pop-star will conduct an interview in which he freely talks of television, film, stage appearances as opportunities to plug his records. The audience doesn't seem to resent the inference that his main object is to sell rather than to entertain.

Even a film is used as a vehicle for the display and promotion of the star. But since their lives in the pop market are going to be short, most idols confess to a longing to be what they term 'all-round entertainers'. Cliff Richard would like to appear in a straight stage play. He is very keen on that smooth Cary Grant type of humour he says and he'd like to do something along those lines sometime. Or in a desperate effort to sustain the world appeal that is necessary for success the weary boys fly thousands of miles a month, to the States, and back, to the Middle East and back, to Australia...

And finally, what's the music like after all this?

Some of it, to be honest, is paralysingly bad. A good deal of that never gets very far. But too much gets a long way. EMI built a computer and fed it questions (I have it on good authority) about the formula for a successful pop. The machine struggled and whirred for a bit and then gave up. No answer; the best answer it could have given. There isn't a formula. About the nearest you will get is a now fashionable 'definition': that you are selling the kids 'an emotion in sound'.

What kind of emotion? That's difficult to say. It varies from month to month. Variety is a necessary part of pop-music's appeal. But excitement is a basic ingredient, an excitement

which is more or less disguised sexual drive. One sometimes suspects that, as in Roxy, the girls don't acknowledge it. The music, next, must be danceable to, and, for the moment, in accordance with the type of dance that is popular (which is cause, which effect?):that means a music with a strong beat. Buddy Holly's imitator, Tommy Roe, currently insinuates some cool lyrics about a certain Sheila under a straight four-four bar in which all of sixteen beats are marked by a vibrating kettle-drum, which seems to be amplified, not so much through an echo-chamber, as through a series of interconnected aeroplane hangers. It is exciting listening because it is a strange blend of the cool and the passionate in a way entirely typical of the kids themselves. The passion is, in the best things, subterranean, and the coolness on top is carefully tended. The twist, essentially, is an 'aware'dance. The lower half - the passions-gyrates, but the upper half - the reason - keeps a cool and steady head on its shoulders. Elvis especially has led the way in abandoning his earlier frenzies for a more considered side-boardless intensity.

But an awful lot of the material exists at a level which it would be difficult to justify in a more primitive society. It has the most basic of rhythmic appeals and its musical value is frankly insulting to its audience. I'mthinking of items like Pop-Eye, the Four Season's Sherry, Chris Montez' Let's Dance, and even Little Eva's Locomotion. Surprising in the last instance since Carole King,the writer, has some considerable successes and is the writer of the pleasant Rain until September. Those numbers above are pure beat, designed for dancing. Their words and notes are minimal. They consist mostly of question: 'do you wanna dance?' and exhortation: 'well swing your hips'. Meaning, sense, shape, human feeling, even good melodies, are sacrificed to the maw of the lowest common denominator. Despite what one knows of the pop market it still comes as a surprise to find that Bill Haley is issuing a twist version of Lullaby of Birdland and that the Jaywalkers are releasing an awkward, new 'done-up' version of the Can-Can, of all things.

The existence of this stuff is all the more unfortunate in that it's unnecessary for the pop market to be so crudely inartistic. A sad note intrudes, uncommented on, from a pop-weekly review: 'The song isn't much but has a haunting repetitiveness and a slow tempo which could make

it a success'. Now listen, everybody, if the song isn't much, DON'T BUY IT. Don't let them fool us with haunting repetition (which just means lack of imagination), slow tempo or sounds that just seem right. Listen to Pop-Eye. There's a little girl shouting to you to swing your hips, jump, start to move and what-not. Behind her there's a whole hockey team of other little girls frenziedly supporting her with a chorus of intermittent ya-yas. The whole outfit seems to have been chosen for its extreme youth, shrillness, lack of skill and hysteria. Girls do not all behave like nine-year-olds wetting their pants at a birthday party.

This, fortunately, is not the level at which the Roxygirl enters the picture. There is a little more thought in her approach. Her songs - and they begin to break down now into rhythm and blues, country and western, waltz-time ballad - generally consider a boy-girl situation with something of the cynicism and idealism that we notice in the magazines. But she still feels herself to be in an inferior position. Susan Maughan considers that being 'Bobby's Girl' is the most important thing for her. If she could only be Bobby's girl what a thankful, and faithful girl she'd be. Unfortunately though, Bobby belongs to someone else. There is nothing wrong - I mean unusual - with a boy-girl situation in which the girl loves another girl's boy. But there is something in this sort of song, a combination of passionate yearning and resigned sluggishness which means that the outgoing emotion is neither one of two desirable things. It isn't delight in being in love, and it isn't sadness at not having it returned - both human and affecting reactions. It's instead a kind of mindless keening which finishes up by being not human at all. This kind of death of feeling goes on in some simpler ways elsewhere. Ronnie Carroll beseeches, 'Please trust in me darling, I'll love only you'. It's not so much that we can't believe he won't keep his promise. It's more that he doesn't seem to be thinking about the poor girl at all. He's thinking about his performance. He sings about private matters with a public voice. Even Frank Ifield is numbered in Lovesick Blues with a situation which on the face of it seems, as it were, dodgy. He's lost his girl. But does he or the music sound sad about it? Not on your life. If you say that in any case the kids don't listen to the words, I say then what the hell, why write them? And if the words don't matter we might as well forget the whole thing.

All in all, I'm not surprised that the girls are mistrustful of the masculine image that's

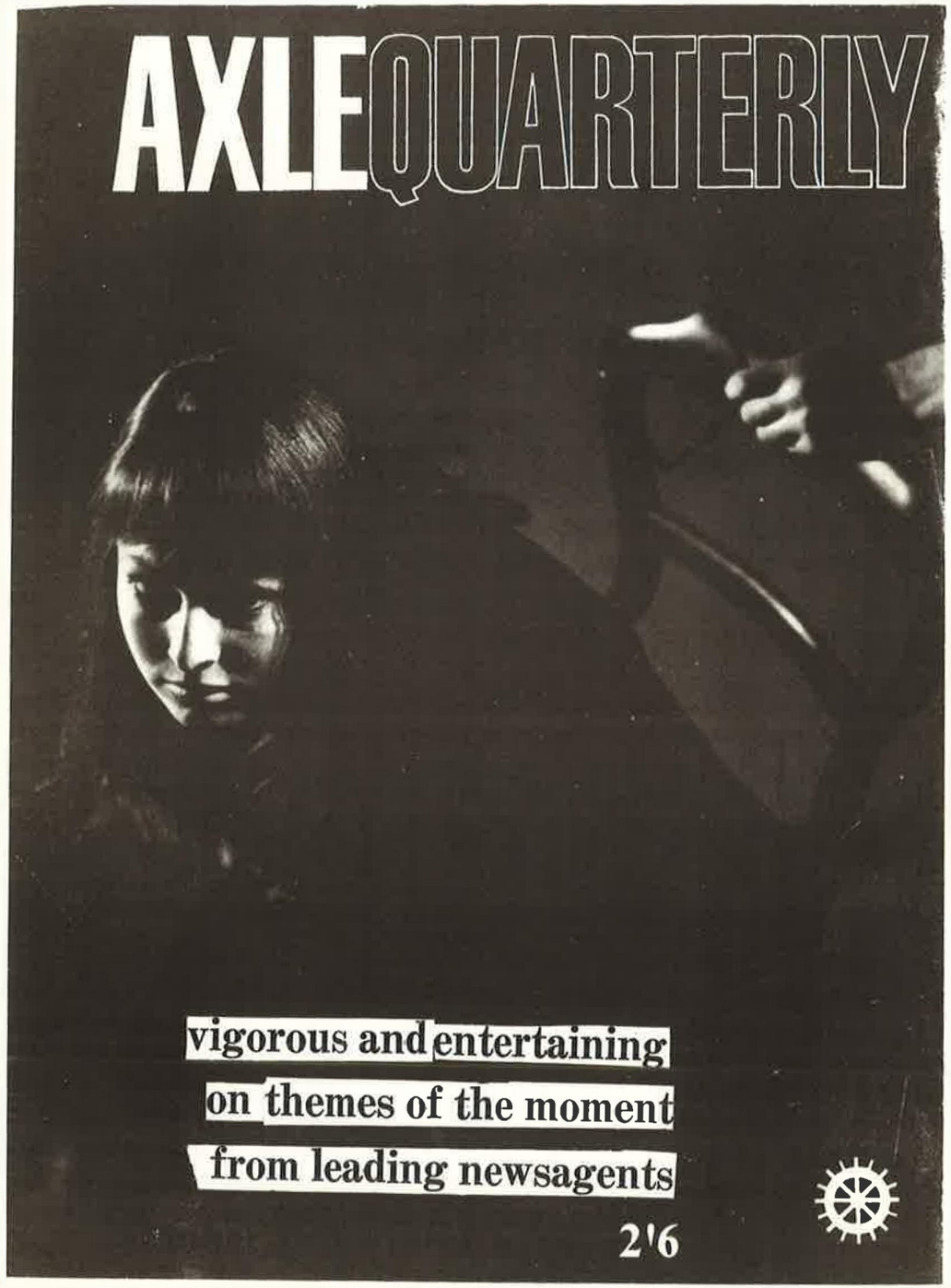
projected at them. And I'm not surprised either at their retreat into fantasy and idol worship. The men are coming to be represented by Jimmy Dean and his Little Black Book. His girl's gone off in disgust at his two-timing but 'with his little black book and a little bit of luck, he'll get another before the sun goes down'. It's this sort of casualness which is replacing simpler romantic fantasies like Mark Wynter's Venus in Blue Jeans - who, it appears, is the eighth wonder of the world; and Neil Sedaka's Next Door to an Angel who turns Main Street from Plain Street into Paradise. Songs like this in which the man loves the girl truly are characterised by extreme romanticism, exaggerated metaphor, fantasy and hyperbole. They are in the idealism bracket. Songs in which the girl is unhappy however, or the man is cruel,are likely to be less fanciful and more powerful. Carole King's days are grey now so that as far as she is concerned, it might as well rain until September. Fair enough. Marty Robbins,in one of the best of the recent hits, to my mind, Devil Woman, is in a more complex situation. He is the victim of the other woman, and having fallen, wants to get back to his patient wife, to whom he has caused enough suffering. But the other woman won't let him go. The song is West Indian and its imagery, strong and simple, is drawn from the sea and the weather. The other woman is evil and she comes like a dark coral reef. Like the winds which bring high tides, she brings sorrow and grief.

The best pop songs can achieve a simple power and density which is wholly admirable. Individual artists like Peggy Lee and Ella Fitzgerald can hardly go wrong. Peggy Lee's pouting, explosive b's in her Little Boston Beans song contain a world of sensuality. Ella improves a fine Stan Getz melody, Desafinado,but wouldn't do it so well if the words weren't sensible, appropriate and intriguing: the situation of two lovers getting in tune, in harmony, is a metaphorical game on the original disharmony of the title. Cleo Laine can make these simple lines dignified, even moving, just by singing them as though she believes it all: 'You'd better love him long/Or let him be If you hurt him/You'll answer to me'. Despite the fact that the backing is poor and the melody weak this is a useful song as far as I am concerned because it presents a girl in a defined situation and allows her to adopt a positive attitude towards it. There's no pretence that the fellow is suddenly going to fall in love with her again at the bottom of the page or at the end of verse two. But she comes to terms with a sad

situation and makes it acceptable by refusing to snivel, by repeating in fact the thing that makes the whole issue worth while in the first place - the fact that she loves the bloke. Here is the Roxy situation: realism without cynicism - love is difficult; but without its easy solution at the bottom of the page. A few simple sensible lines with some reference to actual human behaviour never did any song any harm. I can't believe that girls in this country are content to have their heads buried so deep in the sand that their fantasies show.

It's no use being a Jeremiah though, especially after the event. I suppose pop music will continue to feed fantasy as well as sustain excitement. It would be comforting to feel though that it will get no more inhuman. That's a more doubtful point. The strength of Sinatra was always that his was a private voice, as all love singers - like Ella and Billie Holliday - must be. If anything is disturbing about the current pop scene it is that the voice is becoming more and more public, defensive, even inhuman. It is already remote for us in Britain. It is at least mid-Atlantic and often regional American. Do girls not date and get jilted in Bristol, Newquay, Glasgow, Leeds? Only the Vernon girls have cracked a tiny corner in this market, on behalf of Liverpool. All right let's not go back to bicycles built for two and you are my heart's desire in the school hall, Madeleine, and Jeanette Macdonald and Nelson Eddy and all that. But if Sinatra can gather lilucks in an English Lane why can't we? What is it we're afraid of? He doesn't think it soft. You can get away with pretty well anything if you believe in it, and if you use it as a way of saying what you really feel.

Telstar won't help. Electronics, supersonic guitars and interstellar vox reverberators won't help to find out what makes boys and girls tick. If we really want it way out then we might have to go to Mars with the sound box after all. But I can't help feeling we have't used up the Earth altogether yet. And we might remember while we're at it that the best musical instrument ever invented is still the human voice.



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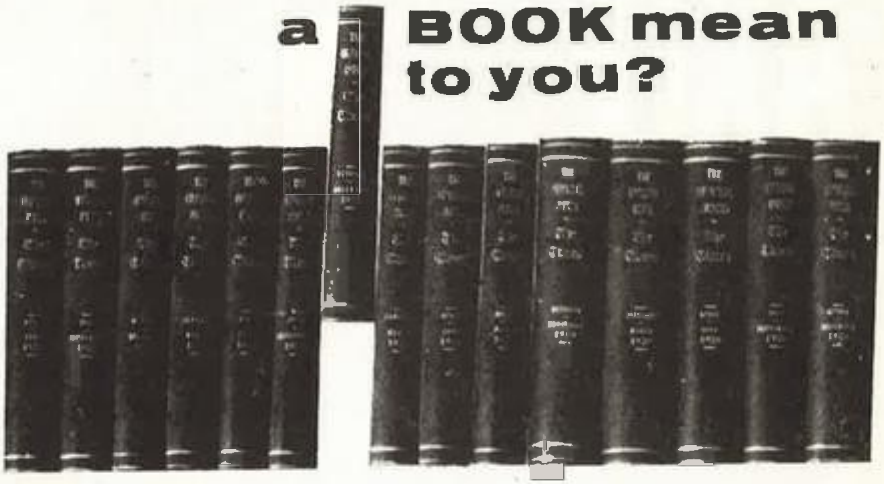

Means to an end ? Certainly. An end in itself ? Perhaps—but very rarely, and to recognize the mark of those few books that conform to this high standard calls for an equally rare degree of discernment ; it requires the ability to recognize merit and to know where to look for it.

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